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The language of luxury, the luxury of language

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Abstract

As a common part of everyday speech, the meaning of the word 'luxury' has been eroded and devalued over time. Nonetheless, it continues to have impact as an element of luxury branding through its deployment across various media, due to its historical associations with wealth, exclusivity and status. Accordingly, the word 'luxury', has been employed/deployed both historically and in contemporary contexts, as part of an economic *system*, including its use in advertising campaigns, point of sale, and in everyday parlance, to denote ideas of intrinsic value (whether existent or not). Meanwhile as this short article will propose, beyond these pragmatic applications, language *itself* might be thought of as a form of 'luxury'; something with a worth that surpasses any functional need: excess or surplus; something unnecessary, but desirable. This notion of luxury can be found in language as a medium, one which we often use indiscriminately, and without regard for its beauty, scarcity and true value. Contemplating the various affordances of language, and the economies of language, where 'economy' is not posed as a financial system, but as a way of thinking and acting within any system, and which allows us to see languages' intrinsic worth. Via five separate thought experiments/examples, ranging from Oulipo-like games of linguistic restraint, through *Fahrenheit 451*, and finally to the ways in which technologies are rendering language as a luxury.

In the end we will see how we might think of the *luxury of language* itself, as something which is far from excess or shallow, but possessing intrinsic value; returning us to the true meaning of the term 'luxury', which we have (arguably), forgotten.

Keywords

luxury
language
affordances
economy
system
intrinsic value

Introduction

As a common part of everyday speech, the meaning of the word 'luxury' has been eroded and devalued over time.³ The word is associated with products that possess little or no intrinsic worth, as well as being applied to those which do. Nonetheless, the word 'luxury', as both a written and spoken declaration continues to have impact as an integral element of luxury branding through its deployment across various media, due to its historical associations with wealth, exclusivity and status. As such, the word 'luxury', has been employed both historically and in contemporary contexts, as part of an economic *system*, including its use in advertising campaigns, point of sale and in everyday parlance, to denote ideas of intrinsic value (whether these attributes are existent or not). This brings us to the present day when the use of language to denote the presence of luxury takes place in ever more technologically mediated contexts, including those tagged by fragments of a *language of luxury*, which is generated by machine-learning systems using non-human language, allied to emergent Artificial Intelligences, whose ultimate intention is to farm personal data and use it within a commercial context to direct the users to luxury brands – further diminishing the value of luxury as a term, due to its ubiquity and automated deployment. In these remarks I aim to bring forward two key points. One is to remind us that the term 'luxury' is a word that has often been systematically emptied of meaning in its commercial/technological applications, and the second is to remind us that language itself is a luxury: one we should pay attention to.

Historical note

In early printed ephemera, drawn from a time of capitalist expansion, the growing need for advertising of goods and services took the form of elaborate trade cards for luxury products, as a means of displaying the worth of the items being offered. The aesthetics of luxury specifically took shape in the conventions of typography/engraving/calligraphy, which attempted to embody, identify and conventionalize such concepts as: sophistication, elegance, wealth, hand-craft, quality, opulence, romance and surplus. This continues to the present day and such typographic markers of luxury include the prevalence of 'Didot' fonts, 'curly bits' and typographic ornamentation. Phillippa Hubbard locates this within its historical and commercial context:

The tradespeople who invested in this form of advertising usually owned businesses connected to the luxury and semi-luxury trades or services associated with enhanced living standards, hygiene, and comfort. Many trade cards publicized the unique wares of craftsmen, artists, inventors, or specialist suppliers. They helped fashion commercial identities around concepts of luxury, novelty, and usefulness by promoting the

desirability of particular products and the lifestyles that framed them (Hubbard: 2012).

Although 'luxury' is *just* a word, these aesthetic presentations over time, set in motion a series of associations around luxury, which performed a 'conjuring trick' on an unsuspecting public, often endowing 'luxury' items with an undeserved status through highly rhetorical calligraphic and typographic performances; ones that served to participate in stripping the word of its true worth and meaning, over time.

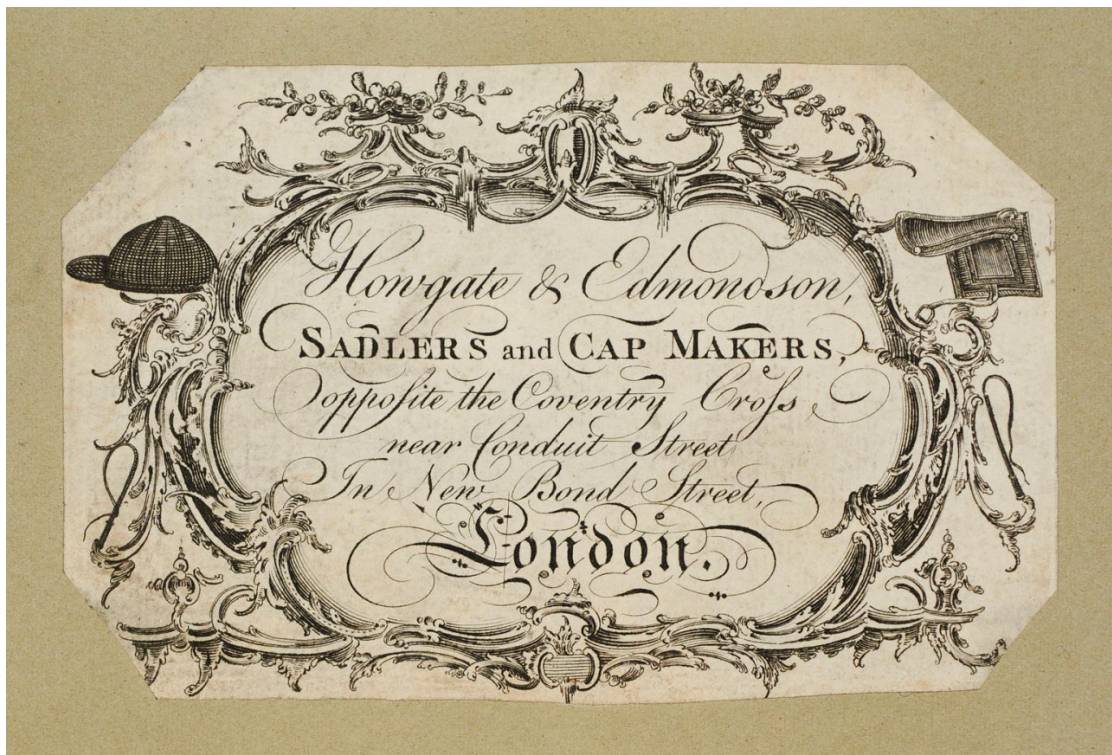


Figure 1: A typical Georgian trade card, complete with extravagant engraved text, whose use of visual language endows the products with a sense of luxury and craftsmanship.

The luxury of language

Beyond these pragmatic and commercial applications, language *itself* can be thought of as a form of 'luxury'; something with a worth that surpasses any functional need: something excess or surplus; unnecessary, but *desirable*. The notion of luxury can also be found in language as a raw medium, full of potential to be crafted, beautifully and with respect for its intrinsic properties. However, we often use language indiscriminately, and without regard for its beauty, scarcity and true value.

In order to think this through, the following thought experiments/examples, offer insights into what is valuable in language and therefore ask us to reconsider what the word 'luxury' means.

Thought Experiment 1: *Language as scarcity/excess/desire*

What would it be like if we only had 100 words (spoken/written) a day, to 'spend' any way we wished, after which point we were involuntarily silenced? What words would we choose, and why? How would such scarcity change our view on language? Would it reinforce its intrinsic worth; make us recognize its craft and value, reiterate its 'luxury'? Or would we enter into a slightly more extended version of the 'twittersphere', where fewer words mean less, not more content? ⁷

We use language lazily. Its ubiquity is a problem. In everyday usage, we no longer consider how important it is, since we are simply too busy using it. However, through rendering it scarce, we are reminded that language is a productive form of excess: something unnecessary but desirable; reflecting the very human desire for more than mere functionality. Rhetorical flourishes in speech have their direct counterpart in the rhetorical flourishes of Italianate calligraphy. Language as something that 'points', which has a limited functional affordance, is replaced and supplemented by the ornamental function of language.

Poetry also emerges from an encounter with the non-functional in language, using language as medium that treats every word with care and precision. Some of the affordances of the poetic are space and time: 'Poetry is crucially distinguished from other forms of verbal art by its foregrounding of segmentivity, the spacing of language' (McHale 2010: 50). Here, multiple meanings, layered intentions, 'gaps' between words and meaning, all become part of the semantic field, and support meaning. In E. E. Cummings' 1958 poem 'l(a)', he uses space to stretch out four words: loneliness, a leaf falls, drawing maximum meaning from the raw medium of language. Here, Cummings shows us how much can be made from very little language and how the craft of a limited form of language is part of its beauty.

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[\(E. E. Cummings\)](#)

Thought Experiment 2: *Language as privilege*

In Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, written in 1953, and at the height of McCarthyism, he imagines a world in which books are burned due to their subversive potential, and in which the only means by which to record their knowledge and to tell their stories is to memorize them, in totality, one-by-one. Each person is tasked with memorizing an entire text, in order to save its intellectual worth, and in doing so he or she *becomes* that book, in turn protecting that knowledge, should society be destroyed and require renewal. The ability to access that knowledge acts as a powerful reminder of the fact that knowledge is based on the privilege of possessing language, allowing culture, society and intellectual ideas to remain in circulation: to be shared. Bradbury's terrifying proposition focuses our attention on the luxury of language, in a world where the key material archives of language (books), can no longer be presumed. However, in a literate society, language is frequently devalued, taken for granted, used indiscriminately and neglected. We only need to review the state of political discourse at this moment in history to see ample evidence of this phenomenon. In a society where literacy is low, language itself is a luxury, an exceptionally valuable commodity, allowing access, agency and creativity, and reminding us that language is a privilege.



Figure 2: The book-burning scene from *Fahrenheit 451*. Director, [François Truffaut](#) (1966).

Thought Experiment 3: *Language's intrinsic worth/slow language*

Within alchemy, 'Materia Secunda' is the second phase of the emergence of meaning. It takes the raw materials of language (the 'Material Prima') and produces meaning from agreed codes; creating coherent patterns and systems. In Max Kohler's work, the written form of language extends this notion and becomes something 'circular', recyclable. It imagines a world in which books are cannibalized, reappropriated, plundered for the words they contain. Here, language is rendered both scarce and slow. This work takes time, and every word counts. Individual words are scanned, creating images that then become the raw material for further texts, and so on, in an infinite system, mobilized by an algorithm. Here, the analogy with slow fashion is clear. Slow language as a way to preserve language and use it as if a precious raw material.

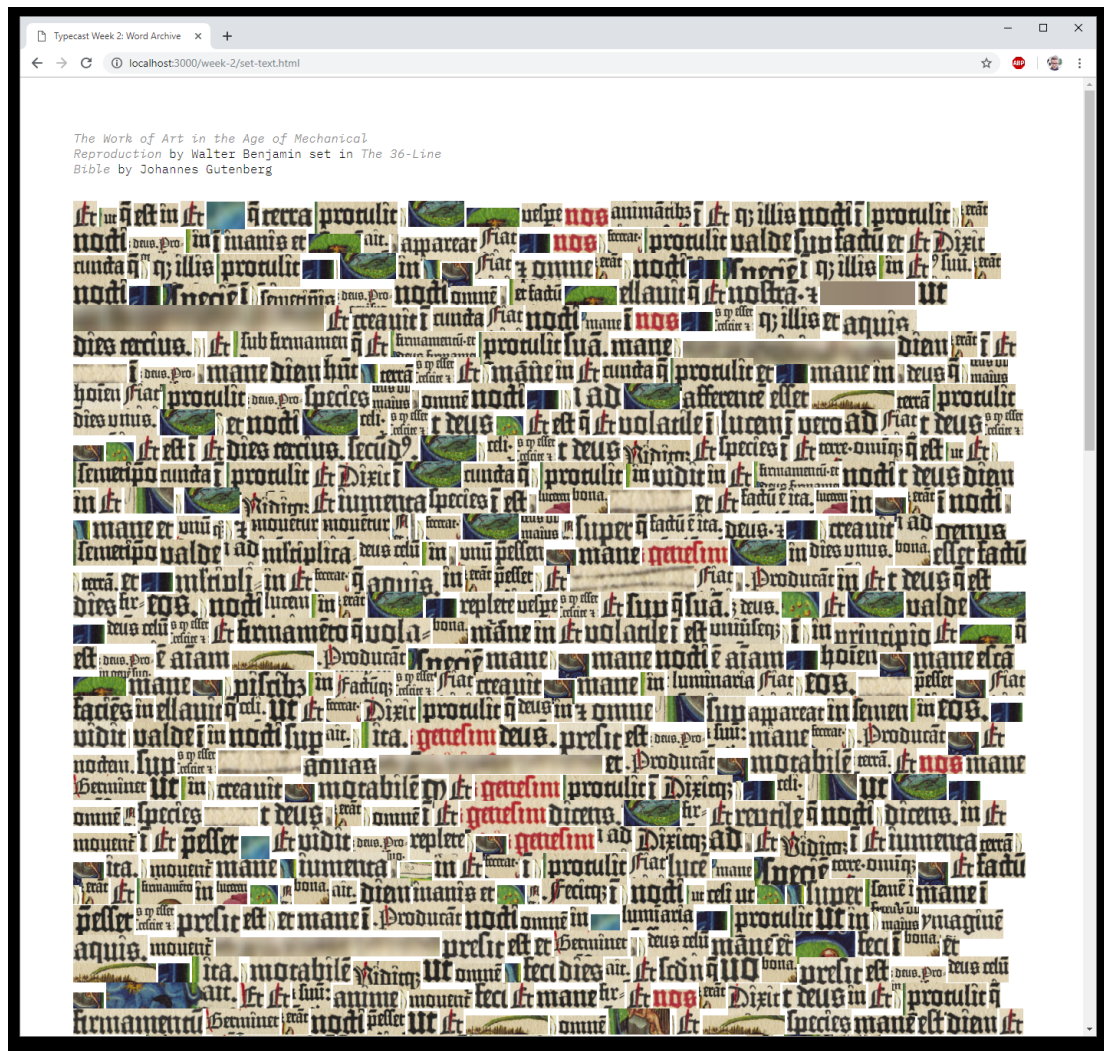


Figure 3: Max Kohler: Scan of the *Göttingen Gutenberg Bible*, custom image processing pipeline and web application (2019).

Thought Experiment 4: *Language as something which acts/does something in the world*

This experiment begins with a question: how is *technology* rendering language a luxury, and what do contemporary language-based technologies tell us about how language works, and what we might value in it?

Beginning in the 1960s, and as part of more general research into ‘Second Order Cybernetics’, which presaged the world we share today, with Watson, Siri and Amazon Alexa, Heinz von Foerster invented the notion of a ‘non-trivial machine’. He posed the ‘machine’ as something not necessarily with ‘wheels and cogs’, but as an abstract but nonetheless well-defined entity (a system). The important aspect of a non-trivial machine for von Foerster is that its ‘input–output relationship is not invariant [not fixed/predetermined], but is

determined by the machine's previous output. In other words, its previous steps determine its present reactions' (2003). In contrast, a *trivial machine* would be one in which the input creates an invariant output. In other words, it can be predicted. By extension, a *non-trivial machine* would be one in which the output cannot be predicted: a machine that has agency and autonomy. We might call these non-predictable attributes 'intelligence' and as such, as Margaret Boden and others have claimed, there is no such thing as Artificial Intelligence, since we lack enough understanding of human intelligence to be able to replicate it.

Borrowing this definition, human beings are non-trivial machines. Their (immaterial) thought processes could be seen to correspond to von Foerster's notion of an abstract entity with well-defined properties. Even with the absence of wheels and cogs, these processes are nonetheless real; frequently materialized through the interface of language, which evidences these cognitive process in sounds and marks. Mark Bloomfield refers to this when he states 'Like an international airport terminal, everything feels familiar and is understood, we connect through an interface that talks our language'. However, although they speak our language, because such systems continue to rely on predetermined input and are invariable in their output, they are still trivial: the words they say and write, which are automatically generated, are meaningless.

Humans are unpredictable: they interpret, play, alter and take ownership of language at the point of input, creating new forms and bringing their subjectivity (their identity/agency) into play. However, at the same time, what they produce is based on their previous interactions with language, and the linguistic elements with which they are familiar (everyone shares and utilizes the same letterforms within a specific language). This is a paradox: language is both a site of intense non-trivial production, but at the same time it works with pre-existing elements.⁸

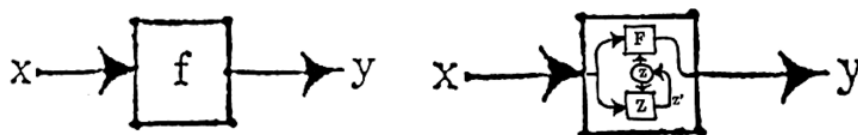


Figure 4: Heinz von Foerster's diagram of a Trivial/Non-Trivial Machine, showing how input (x) leads to output (y), but on the left its' invariant, while on the right, it's unpredictable.

Language as the interface between ourselves and robots or 'intelligent assistants' such as Amazon echo (AI) is still relatively trivial. We do not expect Watson, Siri or Alexa to produce utterances or fragments of writing that are autonomous (not based on the simplistic input=output model). Language produced by human beings on the other hand is radically non-trivial since I cannot anticipate with any degree of reliability, what you will say next. Literature and poetry are unequivocally non-trivial; tethered to the human subject with its essential autonomy, but the trivial machine will only demonstrate intelligence, when it starts speaking and writing to us, or other machines, non-trivially.

Presently, language is still something inherently human, and yet it is swiftly shifting towards being something mediated for us, by machines, and in which the line between human and machine across the linguistic interface is becoming ever thinner. However, at what point does the automatically generated language of luxury, which defines it in a specific way, via algorithms, diminish not only the products being purveyed, but also language itself?

Machines cannot replicate the nuances of language, nor locate it in its historical context. Online systems, which customize luxury, tag images and content using meaningless (trivial), forms of language further debase the language of luxury and language itself. The historical attributes we associate with luxury, including a degree of elitism, alongside craft, time, experience and associated perceptions are being further devalued. When we type (or say) 'find me a *luxury* bag', no meaning is associated with that request or with those words, they simply set in motion a system, using the affordances of the machine, which are generic rather than specific, and which use language as part of an abstract economic system, rather than as a human attribute with nuance and complexity. This in turn diminishes both.

Conclusion

Across four separate thought experiments, we have considered language as a medium in the following ways:

1. As something which acts/does something in the world
2. As a form of excess
3. As something scarce
4. As a privilege
5. As something possessing intrinsic worth
6. As agency.

All of these observations return in their different ways to an understanding of language as something that is more than just a functional system, in the same way as we might pose 'luxury' as more than just an adjunct to commercial contexts. Language has intrinsic worth, it contains excesses (as in poetry), it can be scarce (as in a non-literate society), it is a privilege (as in both literacy and a speculative world in which books cease to exist). Moreover, language acts and does something in the world, and as such mobilizes ideas and enables creativity.

I have suggested that by examining the visual and verbal languages that we use to describe aspects of luxury, including excess, intrinsic worth, craft, scarcity and privilege, these offer insights that allow us to see the luxury of language itself. By moving beyond questions of economy and commercial concerns alone with respect to the language of luxury, and returning to the core attributes and affordances of luxury, we also see how language as a system, material and economy in its own right, is a luxury. It is one we need to protect, especially with respect to the role of technology. The language of luxury becomes excess, seduction, desire, and yet, ultimately meaningless, when generated by machines: the ultimate form of manipulation.

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Contributor details

Dr Sheena Calvert is a philosopher/artist/designer. She has an active interest in the intersections between a wide range of creative disciplines, including practices ranging from typography and experimental book-works, to works involving sound/performance. She is particularly concerned with exploring the implications of emergent language-based technologies, including developments in 'natural' language technologies, as a specific sub-set of developments in AI and Machine Learning. Her background in philosophy of language, aesthetics and ethics provides a critical framework for these investigations and she has a long-standing interest in the materiality of

language (text/speech), including its implications for how we form knowledge (of the world, and of ourselves). These concerns form a larger body of theory and practice-based research, entitled 'metalanguage'. In her teaching at the Royal College of Art, and at Camberwell College of Art, UAL, she is concerned with how to bring theory and practice into closer alignment, by interrogating 'primary' questions such as 'what is an image?' and 'what is language?'. Sheena is interested in promoting a form of cross-disciplinary thinking that takes applied philosophy as its departure point. A graduate of The Central School of Art, Yale University, and the Jan Van Eyck Academy, she is presently undertaking an MA in global ethics at King's College. Sheena is currently co-editing a special edition of the *Leonardo Electronic Almanac* (MIT, due Spring 2020), on the topic of 'Language games', examining the shifting interfaces between language and human beings, language and machines, and machines and other machines.

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Notes

³ In Middle English, the word *luxurie* also denoted 'lechery'. In Old French, via the Latin words *luxuria*, it meant 'excess' and from *luxus*, 'extravagance'. The earliest contemporary sense of luxury dates from the mid-seventeenth century.

⁷ Founded in 1960 by French mathematician Francois de Lionnais and writer Raymond Queneau the Oulipo group's experiments with poetic restraints were devised to focus attention on the raw potential of language. They worked with severe structural restraints in order to promote creativity (see Brotchie 2005).

⁸ To that extent it could (arguably), be called 'trivial' (input = output, predictably), since we do not suddenly create new symbols within the existing chain of 26 letters in the Roman alphabet but accept that restriction of the 'machine'.